"THE UNDERSTUDY"
by Bruce Kane

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WARNING No one shall make any changes to this play for the purpose of production. Publication of these plays does not imply its availability for production.

THE UNDERSTUDY

SETTING: Upstage center is a door representing the stage of a local theatre. A full length mirror stands stage left, representing the wings of a local theatre.

TIME: Now.
CHARACTERS:
ACTRESS – Beautiful and vain.
DIRECTOR – Manipulative
STAGE MANAGER: Nervous.
ACTOR: Handsome and hammy.
(At Rise the Actor stands in front of the backstage mirror doing vocal exercises and adjusting his tie. The Director and Actress enter arguing trailed by the Stage Manager carrying a clipboard)

ACTRESS: Not on your life. There is no way I’m going on stage in front of all those people… naked.

DIRECTOR: I’m not asking you to go out there naked.

ACTRESS: But you just said….

DIRECTOR: I’m asking you to go out there nude.

ACTRESS: I fail to see the difference.

DIRECTOR: Being naked on stage is just taking your clothes off to titillate the prurient interests of the masses. But when an actress… a real actress goes on stage nude… That’s art.

ACTRESS: Well, then you go out there “nude.”

DIRECTOR: Those good people sitting out there in the dark didn’t shell out big bucks to see my boobs. They shelled out big bucks to see yours.

ACTOR: (excited by the idea) Are you really going to do the scene… nude?

ACTRESS: You can stop drooling. Of course, I’m not.

(The Actor registers his disappointment and goes back to his preparations)

DIRECTOR: You walk out on me now and you’ll never work nude in this town again.

ACTOR: (to Director, nervously) Do … do…. I have to do the scene in the nude?

DIRECTOR: Don’t be ridiculous.

(The Actor is relieved)

STAGE MANAGER: What do you want to do, boss? Send the audience home?

DIRECTOR: Send the audience home? Send the audience home?? You never send the audience home.

STAGE MANAGER: Because the show must go on?
DIRECTOR: Because we’d have to give back the money. You’re new to the theatre, aren’t you?

STAGE MANAGER: What are we gonna do?

DIRECTOR: Here… Give me that. (takes the Stage Manager’s clipboard and pen and writes then hands the board back.) Now go out there and read this to the audience.

STAGE MANAGER: Me… I’m not an actor.

DIRECTOR: I’m just asking you to read what I wrote, not do the soliloquy from Hamlet.

(The Stage Manager walks downstage and nervously begins to read.)

STAGE MANAGER: Due to the completely unprofessional conduct …

ACTRESS: Unprofessional? I am not unprofessional. You can call me a lot of things…

DIRECTOR: And many people have…

STAGE MANAGER: …on the part of the actress who was to perform the role as it was written when she was begging to be cast in the role.

ACTRESS: Beg? Beg? I have never begged for a role in my life. If I remember correctly you were the one down on your knees.

DIRECTOR: That was in a completely different context.

STAGE MANAGER: We are sorry to announce that Barbara Andrews will not be appearing as previously announced. In her place…

ACTRESS: In my place? You’re going to send out a nobody in my place?

DIRECTOR: Of course, I’m not sending out a nobody.

STAGE MANAGER: … no one will be playing the part of Helen.

DIRECTOR: I’m sending out… nobody.

ACTRESS VOICE: (confused) Nobody is going to play my part?

DIRECTOR: That’s right. And she’ll probably be ten times better at it than you.
ACTOR: Wait… wait… just a minute. *(nervous and confused)* You want me to play the scene all alone?

DIRECTOR: That’s right.

ACTOR: Nobody else on that stage. Just me.

DIRECTOR: Just you.

ACTOR: Not her? Not her replacement, Just me. By myself. Alone

DIRECTOR: Just you, the spotlight and the audience.

ACTOR: I love it. *(He takes his place behind the closed door)*

ACTRESS: Don’t you think the audience is going to notice that something isn’t quite right?

DIRECTOR: That’s the glory of theatre. The total suspension of disbelief.

ACTRESS: I don’t believe this myself.

*(An UPSTAGE DOOR OPENS. The ACTOR ENTERS holding the hand of a non-existent actress. He does his lines as though to a live and present actress. By the way, he’s also a huge ham)*

ACTOR: I never thought this moment would actually come. Just you and me… Here… Alone…In this hotel room. *(pause as though listening to the non-existence actress’s lines. He will continue to do this.)* What’s that? Me? Nervous? No, of course not. *(pause)* Hundreds of times… How about you? *(pause)* I didn’t mean it the way it came out… I guess I am a little nervous.

DIRECTOR: Look at that… The audience doesn’t even miss you.

ACTOR: Make love to you? You’re asking if I want to make love to you? From the very first time I saw you across that crowded room peeling that banana with your teeth. Kiss you? Now? You want me to kiss you? *(hesitantly takes the non-existent actress in his arms and mime’s kissing her. Of course, he overdoes it)*

DIRECTOR: *(gleefully)* This is working out better than I expected. The audience is imagining you in ways you could never have lived up to.

ACTRESS: I would have knocked them on their collective ass.

ACTOR: Oh God, you’re so beautiful… That alabaster skin.
DIRECTOR: That’s your skin he would have been talking about.

ACTOR: That face of an angel...

DIRECTOR: That’s your face the audience would have been looking at.

ACTOR: That lustrous flowing hair… That swan like neck…

ACTRESS: I don’t remember that line.

DIRECTOR: I put that in… after we… Well….

ACTRESS: (flattered) You did? Ohhhh…

ACTOR: Those inviting, seductive shoulders.

ACTRESS: That line, too?

DIRECTOR: That line, too.

ACTRESS: I never realized.

ACTOR: And those…. (gestures with both hands) Those…. Those…

DIRECTOR: Right now, everybody in that audience would be staring at your…

ACTOR: Eyes.

DIRECTOR: Those, too.

ACTOR: Where are you going, my darling? (pause) Of course, I’ll wait … Till the end of time.

(The Actor watches the unseen actress exit through the door. It closes.)

DIRECTOR: Too bad the audience is seeing her… And not you. The men out there lusting after her… And not you.

ACTRESS: The women hating me… And not her. (projecting to the audience in a dramatic voice) Michael.

ACTOR: (confused by the sound of a voice saying lines, he looks around) Yes, my beloved?

ACTRESS: I’m almost ready.
DIRECTOR: Will you keep it down.

ACTRESS: Are you ready, my handsome stallion?

ACTOR: Like you wouldn’t believe.

DIRECTOR: What the hell are you doing?

ACTRESS: Nobody steals my spotlight.

DIRECTOR: To be completely accurate... “Nobody” is stealing your spotlight.

ACTRESS: I know... The bitch... I'll show them alabaster skin. I'll show them inviting, seductive shoulders. I'll show them... eyes.

DIRECTOR: But you said you’d never go on stage naked.

ACTRESS: (spoken grandly and she starts to remove her dress) I'm an artist... And artists don't go on stage naked. They go on stage... nude!

(She steps behind the closed door. A moment later her dress, her bra and her panties coming flying out into the arms of the director.)

ACTRESS: (sweetly and sexily from behind door) I'm coming out my darling. (harshly to the Stage Manager) Now, open that damn door.

(The Stage Manager hurries behind the door and pushes it open. After a moment, the Actress's bare leg appears and then...)

(Blackout)

THE END